

Cimiullukek – TRADE

Before the arrival of European traders, Alaska’s gulf coast was densely populated by prosperous Native societies. Here, the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people were centrally located between the Unangā and Aglegmiut to the west, the Dena’ina and Chugach to the north, and the Eyak and Lingít to the east. All these peoples had seaworthy boats, and trips between neighboring regions were common. Travel provided opportunities for harvesting resources that were not locally available and for social connection—visiting, exchange, and alliance.



Ivory walrus bead, 3mm tall x 2 mm wide x 2 mm long, Uyak Site. Courtesy of the Native Village of Larsen Bay.

Kodiak is filled with valuable natural resources. The island is rich in fish, slate, driftwood, and many other commodities. However, these resources are different than those available on the mainland, as Kodiak’s geology and animal populations are unique. For example, Kodiak has hard black slate excellent for making ground stone lances and knives, but not the chippable, glassy, volcanic stone available on the Alaska Peninsula. Similarly, Kodiak has huge salmon runs and large populations of sea otters, but not the herds of caribou or variety of furbearers found on the mainland.

Alutiiq ancestors have always traded with neighbors, but around 2,000 years ago, trade goods began streaming into Kodiak. Many of these materials came from the Alaska Peninsula and Kenai Peninsula. However, some were from more distant sources—dentalium shells from Southeast Alaska, obsidian from interior Alaska, and ivory from the Bering Sea.

Trade goods included both finished goods and raw materials. In addition to things like caribou skin parkas, Alutiiq ancestors obtained antler and carved it into arrows and fish harpoons. They used caribou hair in embroidery, and shaped coal into jewelry. Trade was a source of materials for manufacturing in addition to useful objects.

Trade was also a way Alutiiq families accumulated wealth and maintained their prestige. Leaders were able to travel because they owned large boats, could assemble people to accompany them, and had family members working to harvest resources and manufacture goods at home. A wealthy man had people to carry water and chop wood, allowing him to travel, trade, and lead raids. A poor man had to do his own work.

Example Trade Goods

Traded from Kodiak	Traded to Kodiak
Amber	Antler
Arrows	Caribou bone, hair, hide, & teeth
Copper	Exotic shells—abalone, dentalium
Dried fish	Glassy stone—basalt, obsidian, etc.
Gut skin garments	Horn spoons
Parkas	Incisors of marmot & porcupine
Sea otter pelts	Ivory
Seal oil	Parkas
Sinew thread	Pelts of black bear, hare, marmot, wolverine, etc.
Slate	Soft stone for grinding—coal, shale, etc.
Whale meat, oil, & tissues	Spruce roots and pitch